

Geography, traditions provide inspiration for Dickinson arts activities



Photos from the Ukrainian Cultural Institute

By Erin Quinn

Once called the “Queen of the Prairie” because its lights shone for miles across the horizon, Dickinson, a town of more than 16,000 people, now serves as an artistic beacon for the western portion of the state.

Dickinson’s proximity to the Badlands, Theodore Roosevelt National Park and Medora provides ample inspiration for the creatively inclined, including poets, painters and performers of all kinds. Dickinson State University, the Ukrainian Cultural Institute and the annual Dakota Cowboy Poets

Gathering are just a few of the unique institutions that endow Dickinson with a nurturing atmosphere in which the arts blossom like so many wildflowers dotting the prairie in spring.

Dickinson State University
“Part of our mission is to be the cultural center of southwestern North Dakota,” says Ken Haught, chair of DSU’s Fine Arts Department. Haught, who hails from a town in Pennsylvania similar in size to Dickinson and has been in the area for 11 years, attributes the city’s burgeoning interest in the arts to its relative remoteness.

“I think Dickinson is lucky to be so isolated, because a small community like this in the East wouldn’t have anywhere near the arts scene that it does,” says Haught. “One benefit of being rela-

Children of the Prairie Dancers





The Ukrainian Cultural Institute keeps the culture alive through exhibits of the pysanky decorated eggs, embroidery and other textile and visual arts.

tively isolated is that you get a little bit of everything.”

Twelve full-time professors and nine adjunct instructors direct and guide the fine arts department, says Haught. The university is home to the only art gallery in town, showing professional, faculty and student masterpieces. The DSU gallery also displays traveling North Dakota Art Gallery Association exhibitions. During this summer's Roughrider Days Fair and Expo the week of July 4, the DSU Arts Roundup will showcase local creations on the campus' pavilion.

Haught is largely involved with theatrical productions at the university, helping coordinate eight shows every year, four of which are funded by his department. The productions include children's theater, four seasonal plays, a summer performance and a night of one-act plays. The collegiate theater troupe, known as University Players, occasionally incorporates the community in its summer production. In 2000, the musical "Oliver" featured 15 students and roughly 10 community members.

According to Haught, the impact of arts on the economy of Dickinson cannot be overstated. "Any business

that is aspiring to grow is interested in the quality of place," he says.

"That is enhanced by the opportunity for cultural events." And, he adds, "DSU has the dual role of educating students and helping the community with its culture."

Ukrainian Cultural Institute

The delicate, colorful Easter eggs, known as pysanky, on display at the Ukrainian Cultural Institute are not only symbolic of nature and history, but they also represent Dickinson's unique arts scene, one that is intricate, multi-faceted and focused on preservation of culture.

Agnes Palanuk, one of the institute's founders and its current director, says, "We feel that the pysanky are representative of Dickinson because of the way that Dickinson has accepted their culture." When the ambassador of Ukraine visited DSU last year, the Ukrainian Cultural Institute entertained him with traditional dances and the presentation of pysanky as gifts. Each year, the institute's museum commissions more than 10 artists to produce between 130 and 200 eggs for sale and display, using the painstaking wax-resist

method. The traditional art dates back thousands of years, before the time of Christianity.

Palanuk became interested in her heritage after her parents sent her to Philadelphia to study under the watchful eye of Ukrainian nuns, the Sisters of Saint Basil. Her own family came to western North Dakota from the western side of Ukraine. Later, when Ukrainian customs were on the verge of disappearance in North Dakota, Palanuk remembered all she had learned from her schooling to help revive her ancestors' ways of life. "We were told if we want to save our culture, we

have to do something," she says.

That something began in 1980, with one of the largest regional museums dedicated to preserving, promoting and displaying Ukrainian heritage and arts.



This Bandura is the Ukrainian national instrument.

Now, the cultural center has members who represent 30 states and support the institute through membership fees. Although Palanuk says that only about one in 30 people in North Dakota is Ukrainian, the museum keeps the culture alive through exhibits of the pysanky, embroidery and other visual arts. In addition, throughout the year, but especially during the North Dakota Ukrainian Festival held each summer, dances such as the kolomejka, or circle dance, musical instruments such as the harp-like bandura, and foods such as borshch and pyrohy (similar to the Polish perogi) introduce more than 4,000 people to Ukrainian ways of living.

Dakota Cowboy Poetry Gathering

Bill Lowman, a local legend among cowboy artists, lives on a ranch outside of Dickinson. Counting over 300 original paintings and sketches among his life's work, Lowman studied at the Art Institute of Miami, Florida for two years, but returned to North Dakota to farm. He was a charter member of the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, and later founded the Dakota Cowboy Poetry Gathering. Now in its 18th summer, the annual convention is held each year over Memorial Day weekend in Medora and hosts between 40 and 50 poets and singers, all genuine cowboys and cowgirls.

As Lowman describes the gathering's history, he jokes that to find his web site, you should open the barn door and look up toward the rafters (actually, it's at www.lowmanslodge.com). Lowman has been practicing the art of poetry for more than 25 years as a

"closet poet" and says the cowboy tradition "is a way of recording day-to-day happenings that would otherwise get lost." And, he says, cowboy poetry is important because it represents a piece of history. "It's grass-roots, it relates to down-home things. It's an oral tradition that was practiced in the trail-drive days for self-amusement and entertainment. Or to impress a pretty girl." Lowman says the most enjoyable part of organizing the cowboy poet roundup is watching the "raw amateurs and the polished professionals" share their work.

Lowman is quick to point out that cowboys on the silver screens playing guitars would have been a rare occurrence in real life, as there was not room or time for such instruments. Instead, cowhands relied on their voices for singing, telling stories and recording the day's events. Lowman said the tradition of cowboy poetry was revived in the 1980s by three folklorists who were surprised to find the art alive and well across the country, including in North Dakota.

With its many events and institutions, Dickinson's arts scene would make any creative cowboy proud to

call the city his home. A thriving cultural community enriches the lives of townspeople amid the stark but beautiful landscape.

This year, when DSU offers a dance minor in the fall, it will be the only university in North Dakota to offer a degreed program in the discipline.

Dickinson's Ukrainian Cultural Institute has one of the largest outreach programs for a community of its size. And the cowboy poetry convention is among the oldest ongoing gatherings of its kind in the country. In Roughrider territory, traditions and innovations like these blend to make Dickinson a bastion for arts opportunities on the range.

The Dickinson State University Gallery and the Ukrainian Cultural Institute, the Arts Roundup and Dickinson elementary schools have received support from the North Dakota Council on the Arts. For more information about the North Dakota Council on the Arts and its programs that support community arts across the state, call 701-328-7590, or visit its website at www.discovernd.com/arts.

The annual North Dakota Ukrainian Festival celebrates the heritage of the one in 30 North Dakotans of Ukrainian descent.

